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ABSTRACT

The changing role of the school psychologist in light of societal changes, changes in the profession, and the needs of handicapped children is discussed. Such professional dilemmas as the conflict between requirements for mundane assessment tasks and meaningful psychological practice are considered. Relationships of the school psychologist with pupils, with teachers, and with parents are examined. (DB)

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Ritualism and Reality in School Psychology

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University of Michigan
1980

The Dilemma

There is considerable risk of miscommunication between those totally immersed in daily direct service activities and others with a somewhat different role, though in the same profession. It is my good fortune to spend a portion of every week out where the action is, which serves to slow down the hardening of professional arteries. Perhaps, because of these diligent on-the-line reality tutorials, our common cause can be expressed. Should the ready feel at odds with any of the following observations, please know they are not directed at anyone. They are matters of personal concerns in my own professional practice, a soliloquy as it were.

There are two sets of strictures on more creative professional practice of school psychology. One stricture is a consequence of the severe demands to spend time in mundane tasks. But even here there are wide variations in freedom and substance of what one can do as an individual school psychologist: in one setting the plan is for one day a week of creative activity while in another the expectation is a continual stream of the most perfunctory tests masquerading as assessment. This raises the question how long one can conduct a most restrictive practice and not burn out or become a zombie psychologist. When we cannot introduce more meaningful psychological practice in our routine work, when we cannot negotiate a degree of creativity in our week, and when we can't or don't want to migrate, we may even have to work some overtime to do at least something which brings real psychological excitement. In our studies of

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so-called professional burn out - a term which we have replaced with professional fatigue - it is evident that self-appraisal of the meaningfulness of one's work is central to morale. And in these days when conditions would convert the school psychologist's practice into a time clock legislated job, it is hard to remain professional. Yet we <u>are</u> psychologist professionals. We are psychologists with a particular focus of professional practice.

With all of our current problems in school psychology, we are at the most potent work station for psychology today. We are a very large segment of psychological practice. I am told by my colleague, Dr. Calvin O. Dyer, there are 15,000 of us. We interact with more children and larger number of adults who serve children than do our related professionals. When you think of your case load in terms of the children and teachers of the schools you serve, who matches that? Of course our strategies fall far short of our obligation and that issue is what we intend to examine. Sometimes it seems that the politics of our profession is so sharp that it will do us in. We have two associations but 2/3 of us belong to neither, I am told. Other disciplines, both clinical psychology and certain special educators stand ready to take over our function and our setting. "Farming out" our work is a real threat. Licensing and approvals for practice and financial payments are fought over. Sunset laws can wash out years of standards as they have recently in some states. We have the only profession in which the whole populace feels it has had direct experience. A mother said, "We parents are the 24 hour a day experts. Teachers are six hour experts. You are the one hour one day expert." The truth can make one defensive. No matter what the training or lack of it, many are self anointed

psychologists and want listings in the yellow pages. There are very serious and new ethical issues which try the neophyte and experienced school psychologist alike.[1]

With the new APA human services criterion and Standards for Providers of School Psychological Service there is yet another element. In a society such as ours, this increasing codification seems inevitable, though it causes strife within our professional body. Such conditions of our times press us to increase the ritualism of school psychology, to carve out our turf, our practices, and our training and guard our secrets and mystic. I have recently met one school psychiatrist whose stated aim is to give his psychiatry away. School psychologists should be in the business of giving their psychology to the system. Remember you can only afford to give away what you have if you think there is more where that comes from. The confidence of the professional is that of always progressing in the speciality. There are new insights to give away next time. The danger is selling out for ritualism. Erickson has spoken to these issues in his essay on rituals and ritualism.[2] He points out that without rituals, there would be chaos. It is the organization of behavior in rituals which provides history, pattern, and meaning in our lives. But rituals can become ritualistic and cease to be an assistance and become the barrier to flexibility and adjustment. As conditions change, those who persist in ritualism lose their value. Sooner or later (it seems to me often very much later) outmoded rituals are abandoned and their role disappears. A school psychologist recently remarked that no one listens to him anymore. He said, "I am still doing the same good old things I used to do when they did listen. But now they don't listen." If schoc

psychology is as important a discipline as I think it is, and if the school is as desperate as I see it for psychological understanding to enable it to function more effectively in the present times, we must take care that our psychological knowledge is not lost in ritualism.

There is a particular facet of public practice which also creates pressure on our profession. It is the social expectation that making rules can substitute for dealing with psychological issues in special education. Because all of us in schools were, to a significant degree, lax, poor communicators and unaccountable in our work, we have lost out to the lawyers. In our state (Michigan) we have EPPCS, IEPS, a constant flow of forms, and a burdening number of protested decisions with quasi-legal bearings. In our area we even have college classes which make sure teachers know about every disastrous case on record to sharpen up their anxiety. A little anxiety may be good for the soul. Too much may immobilize. And the fact is according to recent B.E.H. classifications, this was not the intent of 94-142.

There are times when more energy is devoted to meetings <u>about</u> a child than to service <u>to</u> the child. All of this in the sacred name of humanism. The professional defense mechanism is to get insurance lest we miss a form. "No fault" professional insurance was suggested to match no fault automobile insurance. We can then hire more lawyers to protect us from the other lawyers. In a complicated ritualistic society the way of life has become litigation. The law is evident at all levels. There are those of us in special education who expect the day will soon come when forms, meetings, and case planning will take up the total energy and no one will ever see a special pupil.

As we reflect on ritualism we remember we are still in the cultural revolution which started out essentially anti-ritualistic before it developed its own rigid rituals. At worst it has resulted in a narcissistic existentialism.[3,4] At best it can represent a renewal of selfhood as the central focus for psychologists.[5] There is no profession or institution which enjoys the trust of prerevolutionary days. This is particularly hard on those of us in the helping and child raising professions where there is so much lay practice. Here we are assuming the role of expert in solving their problems and the public responds as if we don't even really know what the problem is let alone the solution. Here we are, oozing concern and they doubt us - and not all of the doubters are paranoid. Here we are in the midst of a time when the reaction and application of coersive psychology is pressing toward a return to primitivity. It is a regrettable fact that special psychological help which is supposed to be a life line for both short and long-term crisis conditions is seen as diabolical. We have met the enemy and it is us - psychologists and special education. The evil is special education! This reversal puts helpers in an awkward position to say the least. The old members of this association got home free because the credulity index was high. Now with low or negative credulity index, you have to work for every step in helping. Overall, I think it is a healthy state of affairs but it has changed my work. It takes new skills to be honest with a parent when bringing sad news rather than writing for a restricted file.

If these observations have any accuracy, it means certain things for each of us as well as our profession at large. We have to reaffirm our belief - if we have been given to conscious or unconscious doubt - that

psychology is the queen of disciplines and the more we understand psychology the more useful we will be. As you all know, the gaining of functional psychological knowledge is seldom adequately achieved in training. In our own training paradigm this necessary knowledge includes the cognitive and affective processes as they operate in individuals in primary/secondary groups and in systems. It implies skills in assessment, intervention, and evaluation in all three. If we really believe it, it also means that the school is potentially the best available milieu for practice. Since the school is a unique setting, school psychologists will evolve their own practice and not fall into the cul de sacs of our sister disciplines nor borrow rituals which are not germane to our setting.

Directions

As we struggle to understand what is happening to us as school psychologists, it is easy to resort to a fantasy world which we can only maintain on weekends and holidays. Or we can become resigned and perfunctory which is giving up professionally while maintaining our standard of living. It is mandatory that we work in our professional affiliations to influence legal statutes and regulations. It is evident we will have to tax ourselves higher to raise the necessary survival funds. Nothing we are about to examine is a substitute for such activities.

In our profession one can become stullified by dealing exclusively categorization and then with secondary and tertiary interventions: too little, often the wrong thing which is all that is possible to do and then usually too late. I see mental health workers giving up restoration for primary prevention. It is unlikely in schools that we can do this without at the same time dealing with the already present crises. No one will pay us for

prevention per se. We earn our keep by putting out fires and have to do the preventive fireproofing through changes in our methodology and along with traditional activities. For most of us new skills in assessment and intervention are required if we are to deal with the school as a community. Eli Bower pointed out that finding out who is throwing them in for us to rescue introduces us to such an overwhelming complexity that we retreat to old staid activities. We must seek ways to simultaneously do what we must but in ways which induce prevention.

But I return to one's own influence orbit, that work space which moves hither and yon. The thesis is we each need to have at least one thing going in our professional work which is an exciting new psychological practice. There are four areas to consider for creative practice experiments: children, parents, teachers, and the school as a system. We turn to a brief look at the first three. If you do something new for which you have no rituals you will sense some of the freedom needed for survival.

With and About our Pupils

In this year of the child, we are particularly conscious that youngsters are the hope of the future while at the same time psychologists recognize that children must necessarily reflect the problems of the social order which produced them. The common game is to blame. It is the kids' fault if they are miseducated. The culture's approach to children and youth is so myopic that we alternate between blame and sentimental adoration bestowing mass sainthood on youngsters. It is up to the school psychologists to provide a sound perspective on individual growth, the nature of identity, the self concept, and self esteem. Now that cognitive and affective modes are seen as interacting, we have the opportunity to help children see the possibility of purposeful and self-directed lives, as such diverse psycholo-

gists as Bandura[6] and Fromm[7] explain. There is a future oriented basis for decision making which avoids the determinism by the past which virtually eliminated personal responsibility. The continuity theory of personality development has its current critics. At the same time, school psychologists are aware of the intricacies of value incorporation, identification, and group processes. We understand a little better the adult-child interactive processes which enhance learning. We recognize the social compact of democratic living of which Tyler[8] speaks. These are the very things the schools are trying to understand. Whenever there is a poverty of psychological understanding, there is likely to be primitivity of practice. The school milieu contains potentials for supporting normal growth as well as a specially designed therapeutic milieu if we can articulate the pieces. A few of the items on the child agenda follow. More will be found by reading Julius Segal's A Child's Journey.[9]

1. Can we present an integrated theory of personality which can be used as the basis for understanding children and youth in the schools? What are kids like inside? There can be no useful empathy without understanding. The formal concepts I learned which had meaning to me, I found difficult to translate. Teachers appear to use self-concept/self-esteem more easily than other explanations.
2. There is an illusion that, because of the common chaotic nature of much in society, kids are immune to deleterious events which are so prevalent. The fact is each of us lives only one life and each faces the developmental tasks de novo. A risk environment is not lessened because it is culturally common. Can we interpret to the educational establishment the psychological impact of

current conditions on children? If 50% of the pupils in a classroom come from broken families, do we have any advice? One-sixth of our pupil clientele is now living in single parent families. I have found inservice meetings on this topic important to teachers. I have also found, since the condition is one many know as a primary experience, considerable skill is needed in dealing with such topics. Physical abuse is more pervasive than previously considered to say nothing of psychological abuse. Because sexual matters are open in society does this lessen the trials of a teenager's personal sexual behavior in individual development? Because pill bottles are the nation's prime source mental health in the society, is youth drug abuse less important? The nature of youth alienation, loss of hope and some might say Freud's death wish are matters for school psychology. It is through these life crises conditions that we can reach youth. This is not to imply we are going to save the world but rather that psychology has a unique contribution to make for self-understanding of the youngsters and understanding of the upbringers.

3. To some people socialization has become a dirty word. Acknowledging the role of individual rights and freedoms does not eliminate the problem of societal compacts. This means that the understanding of both aggression and prosocial behavior should be high on the agenda.[10,11] Straub's work on Positive Social Behavior and Morality socialization is both a theoretical and practical issue,

certainly far beyond the superficial approaches to discipline generally used in schools. We have to help the educational enterprise realize both the social and identification facets of these matters. I hope you have struggled with discipline codes and procedures which is where the action edge of socialization efforts resides.

4. We can ask whether our diagnostic methodology enables a more accurate insight to the whole person and his/her life prognosis. Instead of IEP's we need to provide ILP's - life plan perspectives. Do those children and youth we study come to know themselves better in the process? How do they see a least restrictive environment? What are their ideas about what they need? Are we seen as helpers? Some of us are fixated on the past in the case history approach; others are existentialist to the point of no perspective; a few have begun to look at how the pupil sees the future for cues. We can make evident the self concept and take advantage of all three approaches. Particularly the study of adolescent behaviour requires a new set of concepts as Blos[12] and Jessor and Jessor[13] have indicated. The web of social support means no adolescent is an island. The analysis of what makes for independence and adjustment at this age appears to be oppositional.

Most files we produce do not end up with a sharred image of what the person is or what the situation is: our assessment system is out of focus.[14] We can become so intent on our rituals that we forget the central goal is for the child to better understand him/her self and join in the search for solutions. Jersild[15] said long ago that, planned or not, schools are where one consolidates one's self image but we seem to have forgotten. This is the answer to the helpers as enemy dilemma.

With and About Teachers

Even a brief look at working with our teacher colleagues makes it clear that they are in the hot seat. Authority in and of itself hardly works in the kindergarten anymore let alone junior high. Their work and their roles have undergone huge changes which not all teachers appreciate. Before jobs were scarce, burn out in special class teaching was reflected in high turnover. Our experience is that the problem of job fatigue deserves direct study by school psychologists. Legal accountability for mainstreamed pupils along with 30 plus others is not uncommon. A classroom teacher recently asked why "least restrictive" meant the regular class. In his view, the potential for greatest freedom for the pupil was obviously in a special class: he was thinking psychologically. The gains and losses of 94-142 have yet to be analyzed. Psychologically I'm more interested in most restorative environment than in the least restrictive.

Our first problem is to increase our identification with the classroom teacher's role. School psychologists can "teach" our subject matter to pupils if at all possible. To teach again for a day may be useful. A special class teacher who has her school psychology consultant as substitute, enjoys his consternation when he has to take over. From my point of view, teaching wherever you practice the art (parent, school or consultant) is a very delicate balance. As Ekstein[16] says we are introducing a being who is to some degree an independent being, to some piece of external reality. We are asking him to incorporate it somehow through our mediation efforts. This inevitably produces a degree of resistance since it means giving up a bit of your independence of action for goals of others. Teaching is not for the thin skinned or softies.

1. Can we make certain our consultation is free of artificiality and is co-equal problem solving? Can we recognize it as a two-way process where the problem at hand is the essential directing force? It is a human interchange. Our resource, besides our person, is the psychological understanding which we have come to give away. And our data on both cognitive and affective processes may be a small part of what is needed to solve the problem. A teacher asked some questions about a psychological report. After we crossed the language barrier she responded, "Well, I thought there was something I didn't understand. If that's what all it means what's new?" If our contribution is to paraphrase with a higher level of confusion, we have hardly solved a problem.
2. While some teachers study psychology in depth, this is not the general practice. Some are given simplistic psychological homolies in their courses and while others are offered theories remote from everyday practice. Yet the teacher's work is the practice of individual and group psychology. Our task is to take what we know both generally and on specific children and make it theirs. Every consultation is a test of the viability of our psychological knowledge. Every IEP is an applied psychological experiment. Again, if we resort to our ritualistic language, it won't be absorbed. As indicated, my preference is to build around the core of self concept.

We can share information in staff meetings when we know an issue is concerning teachers. Mini morning clinics have responded to teacher's needs for on-the-spot help.[17] Sessions on pertinent topics at inservice meetings are an avenue. With the advent of "being paid for attendance" using special education monies there may be reduced

resistance. However, unless we articulate with specific teacher needs as they see them, these opportunities will bomb out. The methodology utilized in inservice is critical: The general low repute of such efforts can be documented. Planning a useful meeting is much more complex than dealing with a single case.

3. Teachers need skills to enable them to obtain primary data through interaction with children in the action setting. Files can be read without generating a difference in teacher-pupil relationship or acceptance. It is when a child shares a relevant bit of his/her life that a new relationship can evolve. Honest exchange of feelings and perceptions are needed. Few teachers have been helped in skills of talking with children. Though some have evolved adequate methods, most remain as defensive and authoritarian as you and I are when we have to manage a volatile condition and are not encased in our professional blanket, such as when we deal with our own kids. How does one talk to children when one needs to both understand their behavior and usually also apply sanctions. We have emphasized individual and group Life Space Interviewing developed by Redl.[18] I have found the best way of teaching this is joint 3-way discussions with pupil, teacher, and myself.

4. Teachers are group workers though they have seldom been given the benefit of even a rudimentary understanding of these phenomenon. On one hand there are the multiple leadership roles they have.[18] On the other is the group phenomenon. There are ways to study both informal and formal groups which can be applied to classrooms and systems. There are the common phenomena of contagion, shock, pie (interlocking

pieces of roles) and symbiotic response. These happen almost daily and their nature and prophylaxis is essential to understand.

In my experience, groups are complex affairs and joint group leadership is necessary to use this medium. Some classroom groups are so fouled up that it is necessary to stop everything at times and go into a group crisis clinic. At the other end is the development of therapeutic group work in schools, still for the most part in its infancy. The work of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania is on tapes and can serve as an entry if this is a new area.[19]

5. Affective education has become a wave in education.[20,21] Too often the conduct of such programs is left to persons without the psychological sophistication required. There is also the need to evaluate affective education. This is an excellent area for school psychology service. We can be a resource on programs and techniques. We can help clarify the concepts involved. We can provide training and consultation. We can help interpret this work to the public and deal with resistances. We can co-teach. Affective education is fast being dominated by canned materials and gimmicks. It is being made into "courses" which will kill it. Yet affective education remains our best channel for prevention. Like other waves in education, this wave may recede before it becomes incorporated. If it does, schools will lose the opportunity of balancing the cognitive side with planned attention to the affective side.

Working With and For Parents

Frankly, the new role of parents has been a consternation to many professionals. Some schools have even developed, illegally, "premeetings" before the formal meetings in order to exchange the real information.

The reasons are two: one is that we do not know how to say psychologically honest things without hurting and generating resistance. This is a particular skill we must develop. Part is because our diagnosis are focused on problems and not needs, on troubles and not resources and planning. The reality of the truth is not easy to deal with either. The other stumbling block is our tendency to tell rather than discover together which would provide a common knowledge base.

1. School psychologists need to get a perspective on the school-home relationship as a generic phenomena.[22,23,24] Kenniston[25] has clarified the gradual diminution of family power by professionals and agencies. Until this is clear we will not be able to grapple with the wide variety of family school relationships which evolve in our practice.
2. Let's not get hung up on the adversary role which has evolved in special education. It is a terrible thing for a parent to have such mistrust that an advocate is needed. What is there that is so intimidating that they need a lawyer? There is a percentage of parents, or psychologists or whatever that have been pressed out of shape by life and will give everyone a hard time. But this is not the general situation at all. Our Michigan Association for Extremely Disturbed Children's parents spent many thousands of dollars to defend parent rights up to the Supreme Court because they know the great percentage of parents are humane and want help for their children. Incidentally, they also believed that children had rights which must be safeguarded as well. Most parents already know what we discover. Getting the level of trust to share this is difficult. As was said, they are the 24 hour experts.

3. Family pathology has been the scapegoat of professionals for many a year. No wonder some parents seem paranoid. They are blamed for whatever and what is more, most of them accept being at fault in their conscious of defensive behavior. But we know children are also raised by societal influences. Those of us who have not forgotten our biology recognize temperamental issues and neurological issues.[26,27] It was recently the fashion to say that families were outmoded; it is the fashion now to talk about the family as eternal. Our business should be to go beyond fashion and discover new processes of parenting which can fit the upbringing process in our time.

It is evident that schools are often without a clear understanding of the basic processes of a primary group experience. A lack of such a start means a total change of design in education for the youngster. Every parent contact is a channel for our learning and an opportunity for inserting psychological understanding as well.

3. In school our families are not clients, a label which causes us trouble. By and large they are not coming for therapy in the sense mental health agencies have codified. The sooner we quit trying to apply those patterns, and ideology, the sooner we'll begin to have more influence on our families. In place of pathology we have to search for strength to mitigate the processes which are disastrous. Our situation is a bit akin to the therapists working with women with families after divorce. They found psychotherapy was not effective without help on finances, help in finding a job, help in getting training. The therapists became depressed as we all do if we are

not focusing on the real target. This is not to say there is no place for family therapy, classical style. But the school seldom has access to this dimension. There are some examples of new ways of dealing with families which are mutual problem solving rather than the expectation of vast personality changes, though again therapy may be the channel to personal change.[28] Supporting parents groups, making our skills available for parent training and group meetings, offering consultation, teaching parents how to talk with children through demonstration - there are so many things we can do. The trouble is, for many the prestige is in doing "therapy" - whatever that is nowadays, since the term has many meanings. There is an equally important role in doing therapeutic things. In fact, it may be that such interventions as a school can practice will turn out to just as effective as the traditional in the long run. I should add that the depth of involvement with parents or children is more dependent on our ability to engender trust than it is on the formal place or acts. Human beings are seldom respectors of roles we assume. Most teachers will have both parents and children who have found it comfortable and meaningful to relate to them with feelings as deep as life itself.

Conclusion

It would seem we need a higher level of ego security to practice school psychology. We seek to be more inner-directed and examine our coping skills. There are new partnerships to be created with children, teachers, and parents. These often require new insights and skills. We will get nothing free because we have been anointed school psychologists. We can neither shrink from our responsibilities or be insensitive to them: the decisions we are involved in are matters of great moment to children and their families. Can we each look at our own orbit of influence and find a few ways to increase the humanizing impact of our work? Try a little iconoclasm: it might help us cross over from the role and ritualism to the functional. Of course none of us can do all of the things mentioned - nor would we even want to. Some of the suggestions are for changes in current processes and others are for new ventures. It is proposed that we each try something different to keep us professionally alive. I have to continually remind myself of the human dilemma. It is so easy to get case hardened. One needs continual reactiviation of the empathic centers.

February 1, 1980

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